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Possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The present report is submitted in compliance with paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 A, in which the Secretary-General, in view of the fact that the United Nations Office at Nairobi had been upgraded to a full-fledged United Nations centre, was requested to explore the possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service there, and to report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-fourth session.

2. The consideration of the possibility of establishing an interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi has been approached bearing very much in mind the often stated desire of the General Assembly to achieve a greater utilization of the conference facilities available there. The present report, therefore, should be read in conjunction with the reports submitted on this subject to the General Assembly at its resumed fifty-third session and at its current session. It should also be considered in the light of the report on the provision of remote interpretation services that will be before the Assembly at its fifty-fourth session.

3. In order to establish a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, 20 Professional posts would have to be provided in order to have available one full team of interpreters. Although the grade structure would have to be reviewed should an actual proposal go forward, it could be assumed that there would be one P-5, six P-4 and 13 . 3 posts. The Arabic and Chinese teams would have four members each since they would provide interpretation both into and from their respective languages, while the other four language teams would have three interpreters each. The P-5 post would be allocated to the Chief of the Service, who would perform normal interpretation duties in addition to managing the service. The language group to which the Chief would belong would have one P-3 post less than it would otherwise have had. All language groups would have one P-4 post. Since the established policy is that permanent interpretation staff at all United Nations locations, as well as conference services staff in general, should be kept at a level lower than total expected demand, to be complemented by temporary assistance when demand exceeds capacity, it would not be possible to resort to redeployments and 20 new posts would have to be created.

4. On the basis of the assumptions outlined above, the salaries and common staff costs for twenty interpreter posts in Nairobi are estimated at $3,919,100 per biennium, at 1998–1999 rates. The cost of the existing budgetary arrangements, whereby interpretation services are provided by staff deployed from New York, Geneva or Vienna, or by freelance staff, may be estimated at $235,000 for a two-week session, assuming that interpreters travel from Geneva

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or a comparable location. Thus, the cost of a full team of interpreters for the biennial sessions of the Commission on Human Settlements and the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme and one additional special session per biennium (a total of three two-week sessions) may be estimated at $705,000. It follows from these assumptions that the total net additional requirements of establishing a permanent interpretation service in the United Nations Office at Nairobi could be estimated at $3.2 million per biennium.

5. In the course of the preparation of the reports on the utilization of conference facilities at Nairobi, all variables relevant to the possible establishment of a permanent interpretation service were reviewed carefully. The review, however, led to the same conclusions that had been reached earlier, namely, that even in the absence of a permanent capacity, interpretation services, whenever they are needed at Nairobi, are provided by staff deployed from New York, Geneva and Vienna or by freelance staff. It was also concluded that the current programme of calendar meetings at the United Nations Office at Nairobi does not justify the cost of establishing a permanent team, the current practice being the most cost-effective alternative.

6. The situation currently prevailing at the United Nations Office at Nairobi is not totally different from that existing at other duty stations, in the sense that a varying degree of reliance on non-local interpretation staff is, as indicated above, a routine arrangement in all full-fledged United Nations centres. The assumption that the lack of a permanent interpretation capacity and the resulting high cost of meeting at Nairobi for bodies whose activities are not financed by the regular budget may dissuade these bodies from meeting there does not provide a strong enough argument in favour of establishing such capacity. Given the overall scarcity of interpretation staff at most of the likely venues, payment of travel expenses and subsistence allowances for non-local staff is probably required in any case, unless the meetings are held at a duty station with a sufficient supply of local interpreters and are scheduled during the few weeks in the year when local interpretation staff are not fully employed.

7. Furthermore, the experience of the United Nations Office at Vienna, which has an interpretation service, has indicated that supply does not necessarily create demand. The number of United Nations bodies that have their established headquarters at Vienna is larger than at Nairobi. Vienna also hosts other international organizations that use the United Nations interpreters on a reimbursable basis. This still leaves some unused capacity, but this has not attracted more meetings to Vienna in spite of the financial advantages that this would entail. The United Nations Office at Vienna, in order to make maximum possible use of its interpretation resources, makes them available to other centres during extended periods, with resulting expenditures in travel and subsistence allowances paid by the organizations borrowing the interpreters.

8. There is another reason why the creation of a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi may not be immediately cost-effective and may not result in an improved utilization of its meeting facilities. It is proving to be difficult to find staff willing to take up assignments at duty stations where, because of the small size of the units in question, career prospects are less favourable than in other places. This problem is complicating the filling of vacant posts at several conference centres. Until there is some certainty that this problem can be solved, the creation at Nairobi of posts that could remain vacant would not obviate the current need to resort to non-local temporary assistance.

9. Seeking to create conditions favourable for the expanded use of the United Nations Office at Nairobi as a venue of intergovernmental meetings, future experiments in the use of remote interpretation will concentrate on the provision of remote services from Europe to meetings to be held at Nairobi. If this servicing connection proves feasible, there would be no need to pay travel expenses and daily subsistence allowances, one reason frequently advanced by some bodies as the basis for their decision to meet at other venues.